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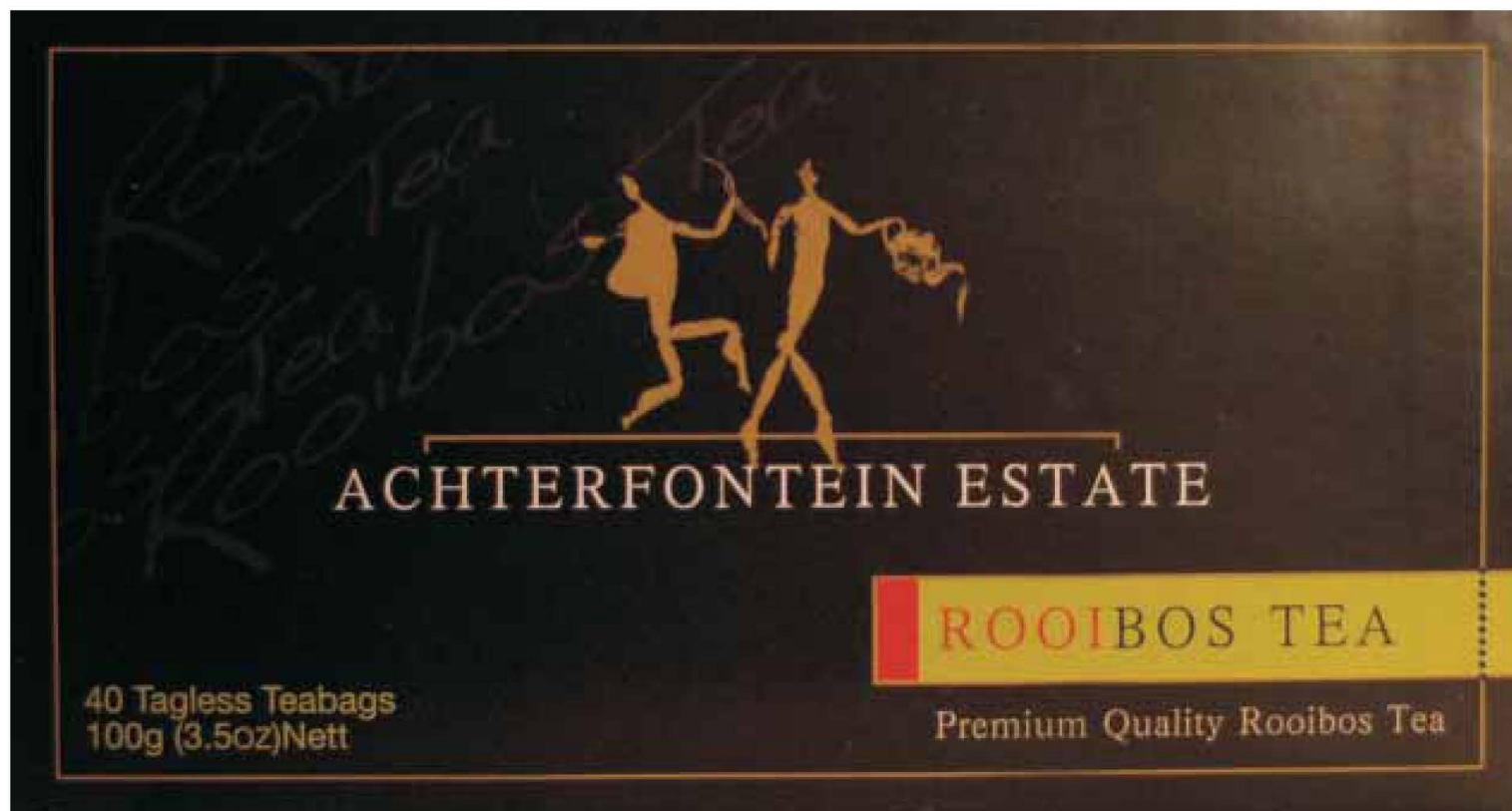
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Revisiting the Image of “Bushmen Tea”

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With the mere reproduction of a rock painting on a box of rooibos tea, suggestions and even requests are being made on the reader. The fact that it is a rock painting connotes the past and even Prehistory. The short bow

“traditional” knowledge. Yet, the first stereotype only relies on a perception naturalising the San and defining them as being “close to nature”, when in fact only their culture matters. As to the second stereotype, ancient communities were just as prone to mistakes as modern ones and that, as far as traditions are concerned, some are absolutely appalling.



Rooibos container. The Achterfontein brand was created in 2008. The logo adapted from a bushman painting. (photo M. Leclercq)

brandished by one of the two painted characters, labels him as a San (i.e. “Bushman”) hunter. Yet, he is also carrying a swollen bag on his back: that makes him a hunter-gatherer. But what did he gather? The other character who is standing on the right and starting to pour the content of a tea pot on the ground, like a propitiatory libation, gives us the answer. As such the whole painting works like a puzzle to be deciphered as follows: “bushmen + tea”, i.e. one of the English names of rooibos.

Thus it is suggested that there exists a connection between San and rooibos, and even that the use of the plant as a type of tea, reached us through them. We are required to believe that this is part of their heritage and that using rooibos is somehow primeval, or at least extremely old, going back to Prehistory (the San being commonly associated with the beginning). In this way, two stereotypes are being called upon: that of the hunter-gatherers, possessors of ancestral knowledge and experts on nature's secrets, and that which gives more worth to “old” and

What do we know about the origin of the use of “rooibos” (*Aspalathus linearis*) as a herbal tea? While there are no clear mentions about rooibos in the texts written by missionaries and naturalists of the 18th and 19th centuries¹, it is often asserted by promoters or pharmacologists², on Internet in particular, that the oldest known reference appeared under the pen of Swedish botanist – and pupil of Linnaeus – Carl Peter Thunberg (1743-1828) who travelled in the Cape region from 1771 to 1773, and who wrote a *Flora Capensis*. In his travelogue, he noted that “of the leaves of the *Borbonia cordata*, the country people made tea”³. But *Borbonia cordata* was the old name for *Aspalathus cordata*, which is not rooibos⁴. In other texts, Thunberg gave a list of useful plants of the Cape and their usage: “for tea, the *Borbonia cordata*; for coffee, the *Brabejum stellarum*; etc.”⁵. Once more, it is not the actual plant called rooibos which is mentioned, but a related plant. Yet, these are the only two testimonies from which it is now asserted, for example, that “the Khoisan, an old Bushman tribe from the mountainous regions west of the Cape [...]”

harvested rooibos and, after fermenting the leaves, made herbal tea from it for medicinal purposes⁶, or that “centuries ago, rooibos was a drink of the Bushmen, who chopped the bush’s stalks, bruised them, and let them dry in the sun”⁷. The idea that this drink was inherited from old San traditions is thus substantiated.

But let us not be hasty in this regard for, in addition to the lack of precision on the species mentioned, Thunberg’s first passage, as described above, mentions only “country people”, which could certainly designate those he called in other parts of his book “Hottentots”, “Hottentots Bushmen” or Namaqua Bushmen”, according to the usage of the time. But he could just as well have been referring to the various Dutch settlers who offered him accommodation on their farms during his journey, which is in fact the general sense given to the expression “country people” or “peasants” in the 18th century in the Cape Colony, where it always refers to Dutch settlers⁸. The list of the second quote includes also, in addition to that famous local tea, European plants such as *Cercis siliquastrum* or *Securigera coronilla*, which were introduced to South Africa and which the said farmer-settlers used to make hedges. Moreover, while Thunberg gladly gives the common names of the plants used by the “Hottentots”, he does not do so for the *Borbonia* – alias *Aspalathus* – which he said, was used as tea. The fact that he mentions that it was “for tea”, while *Brabejum stellatum* was “for coffee”, could suggest that, for the peasants, these plants were only substitutes. Finally, plant guides and synonymic dictionaries give a whole series of names for rooibos: *Bush tea*⁹, *Kaffir tea*¹⁰, *Mountain tea*, *red bush tea*¹¹, *Bushman tea*¹², *Koopman’s tea*, *naaldtee* ou *Naaldthee* (= “needle tea”), *bossiestee* (= “bush tea”), *veld tea*, *rankies tea*, *maktee*¹³. Strikingly, all these names are either in English, Dutch or Afrikaans, while no Khoisan name seems to have ever been reported for the plant¹⁴. *Koopman’s tea*, based on some anthroponym of Dutch origin, even refers to it as being the tea of a certain Koopman, whose name means “merchant”.

Let us recall that the drink and its name, “tea”/“tee”, appeared in Europe in 1610, via the Dutch of the Dutch East India Company. It was only in 1650 England that people began to speak of “that excellent and by all physicians approved China drink, called by the Chineans Tcha, and by other nations Tay, alias Tee”¹⁵. Without playing devil’s advocate, we must admit that all this does not plead in favour of high antiquity and does not reinforce the hypothesis according to which the use of rooibos as tea is of Khoisan origin. Could it be that the tea-loving Dutch settlers, whom Thunberg met in the Cape region in the 18th century, used a local plant as substitute to prepare their favourite drink, and that this practice spread to local neighbouring populations?

While we cannot decide for sure, we can at least wish that the now frequent reference to rooibos as being of very old origin, be better argued in the future. Indeed, cultural traits of great social importance are ascribed great age... which is frequently contradicted by historical data. The mythicisation of cultural traits can happen very rapidly. The example of the horse (of recent introduction obviously) that

appears to be essential to these groups, and seems to go back to time immemorial. Yet, the use of that drink, aristocratic at first, became popular only during the second half of the 19th century in Morocco¹⁶ and Mauritania¹⁷, from 1875 to 1880 in Libya¹⁸ and during the mid 20th century in Central Sahara.

While marketing and promotion today can no longer be envisaged without the use of “brand images”, “pictograms” and other visual identities, the rooibos tea packaging photographed above is one of those¹⁹ packages that have led to an nth manipulation of the image of the “Bushman”, thereby contributing to their mythicisation. In the photograph, their role of ancestors and transmitters of culture is automatically suggested by a rock painting on which one character holds an English-style tea pot of a type made in Europe at a time when the Khoisan of the Eastern Cape were systematically being slaughtered²⁰. Even if the San from the Cape had already been making pottery since 700 Ce²¹, and even if the oldest reference to Khoi pottery in the Eastern Cape actually comes from Thunberg who saw some in the region of Gamtoos River in 1772-1773²², a tea pot in the hand of a San on a rock painting is as strange as Lautréamont’s famous “chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”. Nonetheless, this rock painting still illustrates the reconstitution process calling on a South African past which is so distant that it is perceived as being a historical and anyone can appropriate it. Where the image of the rock painting uses elements from previous centuries, it then becomes possible to project towards the future a constantly reinvented identity.

1. M. Leclercq, E. Bienabe et P. Caron 2009, “The case of the South African Rooibos: Biodiversity Conservation as a Collective Consensus”, *Paris: Colloque international UNESCO “Localiser les produits”*.
2. E.g.: C. Ollier 2006, “Le rooibos, thé rouge (red bush tea)”, *Phytothérapie* 4(4): 188-193 (p. 188).
3. Carl Peter Thunberg [1986], *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope, 1772-1775: based on the English edition, London 1793-1795, Edited by Emeritus Prof. Vernon Siegfried Forbes, Translation from the Swedish revised by J. & I. Rudner*, Cape Town: Van Riebeck Society, xlviii-366 p. (p. 44).
4. John Manning & Colin Paterson-Jones 2007, *Field Guide to Fynbos*, Cape Town: Struik, 507 p. (p. 298).
5. Thunberg [1986]: xli.
6. C. Ollier 2006, “Le rooibos, thé rouge (red bush tea)”, *Phytothérapie* 4(4): 188-193 (p. 188).
7. Stephanie Hanes 2007, “Bushman’s brew to haute tea”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 14.
8. Unfortunately, I did not have access to the Swedish original, where it would have been appropriate to see which expression is used by Thunberg exactly.
9. Jean Branford 1991, *A dictionary of South African English, French & European Publications Incorporated*, 361 p., s.v. rooibos.
10. Lloyd V. Crawford 1977, *Pediatric allergic diseases: focus on clinical diagnosis*, London: Kimpton, 324 p. (p. 157).
11. Ollier 2006: 188.
12. Although the Afrikaans name *boesmanstee* designates qat (*Catha edulis*), which is called *umHlwasi* in isiZulu and *iQgwaka* in isiXhosa (cf. <http://www.plantzafrica.com/plantcd/cathedulis.htm>).
13. Rhoda Malgas & Noel Oettle 2007, *The sustainable harvest of Wild Rooibos*, Environmental Monitoring Group Trust, 32 p. (p. 9, 16, 18) and Rolf Dahlgren 1968, “Revision of the Genus *Aspalathus*... with remarks on Rooibos Tea Cultivation”, *Botaniska notiser* 121:165-208.
14. It is also possible that the original Khoisan terms disappeared altogether, as has generally been the case in South African toponymy.

15. Kazuko Okakura 2004, *The Book of tea*, Kessinger Publishing, 48 p. (p. 4).
16. Leriche, André (1953). "De l'origine du thé au Maroc et au Sahara" *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 15(2): 731-736.
17. Leriche, André (1951). "De l'origine du thé en Mauritanie" *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 13(3): 866-871.
18. J.-L., Miège (1975). "La Libye et le commerce transsaharien au XIXe siècle" *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 19: 135-168.
19. Other companies associate rooibos with rock art. Cf. for example <http://www.bushmanstea.com/> and the cover images of Rhoda Maloas & Noel Oettle 2007.
20. Many are those who were slaughtered between 1770 and 1800. Towards the end of that period, a settler told Colonel Collins that he had killed or captured 3 200 of them, and another admitted to having exterminated 2 700 of them (Andy Smith, Candy Malherbe, Mat Guenther & Penny Berens 2000, *The Bushmen of Southern Africa: a Foraging Society in Transition*, Athens; Ohio University Press, p. 47). Thunberg himself reported to have met in the Roggeveld a commando that had killed over a hundred Khoisan, and speaks of another that had slaughtered more than 400 Khoisan in the Sneeuwege alone.
21. Charles A. Bollong, C. Garth Thompson & Andrew B. Smith 1997, "Khoikhoi and Bushman Pottery in the Cape Colony: Ethnohistory and Later Stone Age Ceramics of the South African Interior", *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 16: 269-299.
22. In this regard, he wrote: "I found pots made of baked earth by the Hottentots themselves."